

IL SONNAMBULO
By
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PLACIDO DOMINGO

has been walking in my sleep
for five years.

The first time
I managed to grasp his hand
for just a moment
as he was pulled from me
like a melting caramel
by an *après-opera* crowd.

Two years later
we spoke
mouthing cocktail party trivia
but our eyes met
and I knew he saw
past the olive in my martini.

Last night
we escaped in an old Toyota
to a muddy construction site
where he poured out his heart
and promised to grow old with me.

Before we could decide what to do
with the lives we had ruined
the teenage daughter
of his richest patron
materialized in the brickyard.
With a smile as evil as Scarpia
she rapped on the car window
and said he was wanted on the phone.

Oh Placido!
I don't want to rush things
but won't you hurry this
just the least bit?
There will be gossip. And besides,
Neither of us is getting any younger.

PLACIDO HADN'T BEEN AROUND LATELY

and it had been
a fairly peaceful Sunday
until I missed him enough
to go to a bookstore
and buy his autobiography
but before I opened the book
the picture on the cover
sent me to the emergency room
with cardiac arrhythmia.

They confiscated the book,
kept me under observation
for twenty-four hours,
and treated me with ice packs
but when they let me go
my pulse still registered tango.

So I still don't know
where he says he spends his nights
but I'm not selling any secrets
to *Newsweek* or *Rolling Stone*.
After all, there are some things
a person wants to keep private.

I MUST ADMIT IT WAS GOOD

to see you again, Placido,
notwithstanding the shock
of finding you at a reception
in Steelville, Missouri,
where, like Brigadoon,
the 1900 residents come to life
once every hundred years.
There can't be five opera lovers in town.

Nonetheless, you were beautiful
and gracious to the natives
and wise enough not to try
Aunt Leyla's potato salad.
I understood your restraint:
no hot glances, no secret smiles,
no whispered phrases in corners.
Nobody there could have known
what we have been to each other.

I joined the stage-door jennies
who followed you to your limousine
and waved you on your way.
I watched you go without a word.
But LEAVE WITH MY SISTER?
You blew it, mister.

IT'S ALL OVER BETWEEN US, PLACIDO

For nearly ten years
I have followed you from dream to dream
waiting for you to speak first.
I have ignored
the dull smokestack effluvium
that has gradually engulfed your dark curls
knowing I am overdue
for a touch-up myself.

I thought you understood, Placido.
You learned my name.
We seceded from dull receptions,
talked trivia on balconies,
stole away for brief tormented walks.

Now morning stands between us
like a menacing baritone.
I will not dream of you again.
I am left in an empty auditorium
where the last act has been canceled
and the orchestra has gone home.

Oh Placido! I thought you less insensitive,
supposed the passion of *Andrea Chenier*
ignited your breast. How could I
have forgotten the *verismo*
of your cavalier *Cavalleria*?

Last night, Placido,
when I nibbled on your ear,
I was not challenging you to a duel.

OK, I WAS WRONG

Here you are again,
cropping up like a hangnail.
You draw me like a magnet,
your voice melts my hairpins.

But, Placido, I am tired.
It's time you turned your attention
to new frontiers, other boudoirs.
There must be younger women
hanging to your coat tails
and couldn't you make
some kind of deal—
a couple of voice lessons
or tickets to *Cav and Pag*?

In the wee hours of bleak Tuesdays
I awaken to my old pink robe
crumpled across the foot of my bed
and I am embarrassed.

You are out of my class, Placido,
yet I am not out of your reach.
Why me? Is this fair?
This morning I smashed the stereo.
Take that.

SITTING IN THE PARKING LOT

at the neighborhood Wal-Mart
wearing Radio Shack ears
I am possessed by Placido Domingo:
"Salut! demeure chaste et pure."
I wonder whose image
sweetened your tongue
to record this declaration
and whether you could have known
your impassioned *"O Marguerite!"*
would break my heart.

I am too many years
and too many parking lots
past chaste and pure.
Too many suns
have turned my arms to leather,
my face to a street map
of potholes and pitfalls
and my voice to a brass alarm.

Placido, one morning
you too will face yourself.
While shaving you will start
to sing *Vesti la giubba*
and your voice will crack.
Your mirror will lament
"This was Placido Domingo."

WELL, YOU CERTAINLY GET AROUND

This evening I thought I saw you
walking out of Home Depot
whistling *Nessun dorma*.
You had a bag of Ready Mix
slung across your shoulder.
Throwing the bag in the back seat
of an anonymous Volkswagen
you slid into the driver's seat
and peeled out of the parking lot
—singing, of course.

I tried to get your license number
but there wasn't enough light
and anyway I don't know
what I would have done with it:
have the highway patrol
stop you at the state line?

Placido, is one of us
stalking the other,
and which is which?

SO THAT'S WHY YOU WERE IN TOWN

There it was in the morning paper:
Placido Domingo in Concert.

And for this, Placido,
I rented a crummy room
in a fleabag motel
and haunted the back door
of the performance hall,
hoping to catch a glimpse of you.

On the morning of the big event
you slipped from a side door
wearing dark glasses, looking for doughnuts.
I ran after you, calling your name
into a bitter wind.
Without stopping to look back
you waved your hand impatiently:
“No, please! I am tired.”

How tired could you be
two hours later
heading a parade
of dandified drum majors
pretzel-shaped acrobats
and trained dogs on bicycles?
As if your name
weren't a melody in itself,
they gave it a tune
stolen from a French nursery rhyme:

*Pla-ci-do Do-min-go
Now in concert, one night only,
Pla-ci-do Do-min-go
Come on down and see the show!*

All I can say is
you must have a hell of a press agent.

PLACIDO, I APPRECIATE

the ticket you left in my mailbox
even though my seat
was in the senior citizens' section
and I couldn't see the stage.

I couldn't hear you very well, either—
or, for that matter, the other two,
but I didn't mind so much
about Carreras and Pavarotti
because one tenor hanging around
night after night is enough.

What I really wanted to hear
was your voice killing me softly
with *Dein Ist Mein Ganzes Herz*
but up there in the next to last row
all I got was some old geezer behind me
yelling, "Why don't you guys sing
'I'm Sitting On Top of the World'?"

YOU DIDN'T EVEN LOOK UP

when you signed my program:
Sincerely, Placido Domingo.
I could have been third trombone
in the high-school band.

Where do you get off
making eyes at me for ten years
and then treating me
like a garlic-fed coloratura?

I have read that Luciano Pavarotti
once pinched Beverly Sills
on her red delicious *derrière*
and she threw an apple core at him.

I had been saving apple cores
for days before your concert.
Now they are turning brown in my kitchen.

Placido, you have dropped me
like a basso profundo's finale.
I will try to survive this.
After all, *così fan* tenors.
Anyone for apple butter?

YOU SAT ON THE GRASS

all yummy-chummy
and talked to everybody but me.
I crept up next to your
replica 16th century cutlass
and whispered:
“Placido, I have been writing
some poems about you.
Shall I mail them to you? ”

You looked alarmed.
“Is there anything in them
that would bother Mrs. Domingo?”

“How do I know?” I said.
“Does she get in a snit
about your fan mail—
all that dull prose
lousy grammar
and ghastly spelling?”

Margaret,” you said,
“You are becoming a damned nuisance.”
“Well,” I said, “you started it.”

TODAY THERE WAS A WOMAN IN THE MALL

small and dark and gypsylike
who said she interprets dreams.
I paid her fifteen dollars
and lamented your nocturnal omissions.

She stared at me intently.
“Thees Plossido,” she said
in an accent that would spread
hysteria in the Motion Picture Academy,
“ees he real or somboddee in a book?”

“He’s a singer,” I said.
“In the middle of the night
he invites himself into my head.”

She dismissed me
with a massive Neapolitan sigh.
“Ow many years you leeve een Peetsborg?
W’y you don’t dream about Brooze Spreengsteen?”

PLACIDO, I THINK IT'S TIME

I saw a doctor.
My husband says I am singing
Di quella pira in my sleep
and I ask you, how is that possible
when I have had laryngitis
for three days?

He also claims
my spurs are tearing the sheets.

TODAY I SAW DR. FAUSTUS

and his diagnosis was vanity.
“It’s obvious to me,” he said,
“that you are craving applause
and seeking the limelight.
What you are doing, Margaret—
(why do these strangers get so chummy
with the first names, Placido?)
what you are doing is basking
in reflected glory. Margaret,
this is not good. There are better ways
to achieve your heart’s desire
than having a Spaniard in your bedroom.

“According to your chart
you are reasonably well educated.
You read a lot and you gravitate
to artsy types. Well, then—
this guy is famous, right?
A tenor, I think you said.
So what? He probably has
a few skeletons in his repertoire,
maybe made a few little deals
here and there. Most of us do.

“Take it from me, Margaret,
fame and fortune have their price.
There will be the devil to pay.
Be what you are
and stop chasing shadows.
You want your name in the paper?
Write a poem or something.
You want to be on stage?
Give a reading.”

DR. MIRACLE ACCUSED ME

of Venus envy. “What you really want,”
 he said, “is to be a leading lady.
 Do you really think the way to a contract
 is to open your bedroom door
 to a Tannhaueser-come-lately
 who isn’t even a *heldentenor*?
 The casting couch went out with
 The Ziegfeld Follies.

“Now listen to me, my dear.
 If Garrison Keillor can sing,
 you can sing. All you have to do
 is crank up your courage
 and you’ll forget about this Domingo fellow.”

He started me on vocal therapy:
 took me down to the local Bingo hall,
 told me to get up on the platform
 and toss out a few arias.

“But, my allergies—” I began.
 “No excuses!” he said. “Just do it.”
 I tried, I really did,
 but I didn’t even make it
 through the cadenza of *Sempre libera*
 before I started coughing.

“Sing! Sing!” he thundered.
 I tried a few bars of
Quando le sere al placido
 and he roared
 “what the hell do you think you are,
 a tenor?” I burst into tears
 and locked myself in the ladies’ room.

After an hour I peeked out
 and saw that he had gone
 leaving his notes behind.
 I picked them up and read
 “Resists therapy. Exaggerates symptoms.
 Uncooperative patient.”

I WANTED A SECOND OPINION

so I made an appointment with Dr. Dulcamara
who was more than sympathetic.
“Signorina,” he said, “I understand
what is troubling you.
You are starving for love
and the hunger pangs devour you
even as you sleep.
You need a good tonic
and I have just the thing.”

He rummaged in a cabinet
and handed me a bottle.
“Take this as needed,” he said,
“and if you continue to feel rejected
see me again in a week or two.
You can take your first dose now.”

He charged me forty-five dollars
and gave me a refill prescription.
I was dead drunk when I got home
but that night I slept like a baby.

I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY EARS

when Dr. Bartolo peered at me
through his absurd thick glasses
and said “this Domingo hombre
is obviously bad for your health.

“Do not mistake me,” he said.
“I have the greatest respect
for the Spanish but, believe me,
I would very much caution you
against getting involved with
some *cantante operático* from Madrid.
Those fellows are whimsical, transient
and widely presumed to be
the source of chronic recurrent heartburn.

“Have you had any problems
with gastroesophageal reflux?
No? Well, you will.
Let me strongly recommend
that you find yourself
an *enamorado* from Seville—
maybe a nice doctor?”

AS A LAST RESORT, I AM READING FREUD

The Interpretation of Dreams

doesn't say a word
about obsession with tenors
who have eyes like summer
and voices like spilled honey
and bodies like gods.

Of course, Siggy thought everything
came down to sex, but I don't see it.
You won't stay out of my bedroom
but I believe that is said to be
typical of tenors.

Freud was all in favor of hypnosis
but if I am not already hypnotized
I don't want to come out
of some wand-waver's inner sanctum
believing you are Antonio Banderas
or Carol Burnett in drag.

So far, I haven't found a mention
of anything musical at all
except a passing reference
to a Wagner opera
but I never heard of anyone
being obsessed with Wagner
except maybe Cosima Liszt.

I have noticed that the German
word for dream is *traum*,
one letter shy of trauma.

I'm afraid Freud isn't going to help much
and I keep falling asleep while I'm reading.

MAYBE I NEED A CLERGYMAN

since all the doctors are quacks.
I looked in the Yellow Pages
and found a Father Laurence
who was somewhat strange
and talked a lot about herbs
but he was a good listener
even though he seemed a bit lugubrious.

“Father,” I said, “There must be a way
to get this Castilian monkey off my back.”

“My child,” he said,
although I was twice his age,
“you sleep, but you do not rest.
Your eyes have circles under them
as big as the rings of Saturn.
Now, I am not a doctor
but I can give you a proven remedy
that will make you sleep like the dead.”

He handed me a trial-size bottle
of something that looked awful
and smelled like rotting spinach.
On my way home I threw it in a dumpster.

It’s time I shaped up.
Physician, heal thyself.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Last night I filled a tub
with scented water,
buried my shoulders
in Peach Passion bubble bath
and sent you down the drain.

Baptized and glowing
I settled into bed
between caressing sheets,
plugged José Carreras
into my ears
and prepared to dream.

Oh paradise!
His voice washed over me
like tears in sunlight.
I forgot you as quickly
as yesterday's shopping list.

Two bars into *Ô paradis*
the batteries went dead.
La vendetta!

Oh jealous *divo*
What do you want?—
all my heart, all my soul
and only my ears?

PLACIDO, I REALLY MUST INSIST

that you stay out of my bedroom.
We've been together for years,
albeit intermittently.
You have sizzled through my dreams
like a cloud of escaping steam.
But all these years, Placido,
you have played with my feelings
and never once with anything else.
I have grown old waiting for you
to come down off your high C.
I can't afford you anymore;
I have had it with tenors.

I am ringing down the curtain,
do you understand?
I am locking my door
and drinking espresso
and praying for insomnia.
If you insist on barging in anyway,
I will roll over and snore.
It's over, Placido.
La commedia è finita.

EPILOGUE

Last night, Placido,
I dreamed of Mikhail Baryshnikov
and it serves you right.

He was younger than himself
and refreshingly direct.
Two bohemian spirits,
we sprawled on a shabby bed,
sliding gradually to the floor
as we guzzled vodka
straight from the bottle.
Finally on our backs
side by side, knees up,
we laughed hysterically.

Suddenly he turned
those enormous impish eyes
directly on me and said
“Margaret, tell me,
are you—what you say—attached?
Are you free for the evening?”

“Misha, I’m free as a convict
who has been pardoned,”
I breathed.

“Hokay!” he said, jumping to his feet
like a volunteer at a temperance rally.
In lemonade-sober English he chirped
“There is something I must do.
You will please to stay with my dog
until I am back at two a.m.?”

He danced out, whistling
Afternoon of a Faun.

THE END